

THREE ESSAYS

(for a poetics
of psycho-materialism)

R.M. Haines

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IDENTITY AND ITS DISCONTENTS: NOTES ON RIMBAUD

*Child, certain skies have sharpened my eyesight:
their characters cast shadows on my face.¹*

The other is always there first. One does not birth oneself, does not teach oneself language. As necessary as mothers and those we live among are the generations of dead, known and unknown. "I" comes to be—is founded and forged—in relation, both intimate and ghostly. So many worlds in these relations, in the economies they form and emerge from. Mirror images, distortions, palimpsests. Other people's faces and names. Others, otherness, as origin and horizon of oneself. An ancient idea.

Yet this alterity foundational to the emergence of self gets concealed, forgotten, erased. Sometimes violently, sometimes with regret and guilt, with desire. Abjection of the mother is only a beginning. In maturing, one learns to put their necessary others behind them, beneath them, elsewhere, in hidden pasts. One learns to believe one stands alone. For a time at least. In the nearly perfected mirror one finds their traces, echoes and asymmetries, discontents that will not let go. These haunt us, and soon we're trying to bring them back, projecting them all over again, trying to find the lost ones in new others whom we mistake. Infatuations, delusions. Romances. Belief in authority. And some can't ever get out of this mirror, drawing everyone else in with them. *That's she, the little girl behind the rose bushes, and she's dead.— The young mother, also dead, is coming down the steps.* "I" as mausoleum. As reliquary.

¹ Throughout, Rimbaud's (translated) words appear in italics. See the Acknowledgments page for more info.

For executives and psychopaths, all this is seamless. For narcissists no harm is felt in abjecting and concealing the traces of those to whom they belong, through whom they are. And it is not only family, friends, the personal: it is all others, otherness itself—the entire world outside the fantasy of *causa sui* (self-createdTHREE ESSAYS formatted for PDF, self-authorized.) And these perfect killers, the psychopaths, they make our world, or claim to, by buying it. Owning it. And so they repeat the whole thing over again: I am the one, the only one (Yaldabaoth), and the others play no part. *Let no one come near. I am certain that I smell scorched.* This is law. Copyright. Property. An “I” absolutized by virtue of capital. A corporation as a perfected identity. The violence of pillage repeated from history, from psychic biography, and invested in a deathly fantasy of the social that consumes its own foundation. *A pillow is over my mouth. They cannot hear me, they are ghosts. Besides, no one ever thinks of anyone else.* Cannibalism. Hyper-Oedipus. Metastasis of the Anti-Social.

Still: dead labor asserts its claim. The workers and exploited ones. Slaves and caretakers. The nameless, lost, derided. The invisible. All the others. The child in the cobalt mine living inside your battery. The sweatshop worker with an undetected cancer. They live hidden in each head as well as in the complex of social fact. An entire civilization is dedicated to consuming and concealing them. How long does something like this last? How long can it? (Never to confront the discarded traces. To build an infinity from this denial.) Acceleration is necessary to sustain this, to forestall the absolute cataclysm of self-recognition: the other recognized in the self. And who speaks to and for those inside of us, those who contain us ourselves in turn? Who admits those who refuse to be part of the “I”?

Rimbaud learned early: *Je est un autre*. I is an other. The fundamental insight. A psychic formula. To recover the alterity persisting, of necessity, under hierarchies of both self and society. Eclipse of the ego, of the executive. Refusal of *causa sui*. *If wood awakens as a violin it is not at all its fault*. Consciousness coming to from within matter. To realize materiality of soul: psyche as archive, as recording, vaster than ego. Psyche as ground of ego. As the room where all the people are. Their images. Personal, transpersonal. A cosmos on the other side, pouring through. (Torus, an endless flowering.) *Your head turns aside: new love! your head turns back: new love!* New positions for the subject to emerge within. New temporalities. New dynamics of emergence between people, between words. New meanings. New languages for relation that does not admit ownership of meaning, of property.

“I is an other” as a bivalent formula moving forward into future collectivity and backward into personal and historical pasts. In each direction, discarded contents, concealed and degraded through exploitation and use/abuse, come forward in strange new intimacies and explosions. Intimacy, in fact, becomes explosion, and vice versa. No more narcissism of holding onto what cannot be shared, that cannot become the material of a communal psyche. Because it recognizes it already originated there, in its generative every-nowhere. The poem pulling the self from psyche, into psyche, into its commune, pulling down into a language wherein identity is mutable again. And to explode, to blossom. Stars, breaths. *A tap with your finger on the drum releases all sounds and begins the new harmony*. To communicate explosion as a social and psychic potential. To constitute, in language, its fact.

Imagine a poem's temporality is grafted onto your own, there, in the very moment of your reading. Reading as the map that

becomes the site itself, and writes its own map anew. Changing it, in accordance with the times, with conditions. The poem as mutable hologram radiating from the lines, an interface and field of emergence compelling entrances and exits, explosions that house, houses that burst anew. And the embodied self as event, a toxic and salvific node, compelling its communication to another: the other in which it was found and founded. *Othernesses*. Endless echoing of semiotic and psychic events erupting into the materiality of history, of society, of identity. A collective psycho-material archive of past and future events, mapping and remapping the now. *It is as simple as a musical phrase.*

REVOLT AND DIVINATION: ON SEAN BONNEY'S *LETTERS AGAINST THE FIRMAMENT*

The invisible, whatever that is.
As if it didn't hover above us.
Announce itself with blue fire.²

The invisible is not nothing. There must be something there which one cannot see. Attempts to see or comprehend the invisible go by many names: divination, mysticism, theology, metaphysics, spiritualisms of various kinds. For some, the desire is "to see through the veil" into the numinous realm and thereby discover (depending on the seer) the mind of God, the laws of the cosmos, eternal truth, etc. This is a doctrine of transcendence. For others, an inverse desire—the doctrine of immanence—is to see the visible world anew so that it begins to disclose the essence of an invisible, eternal nature rooted in the here and now: "To See a World in a Grain of Sand / And a Heaven in a Wild Flower." The Sun, the Eye. The interpenetration of visible and invisible. Creation as a window, or as a divine garment.

Excrements of consumption are the natural
discharges of human beings, remains of clothing in
the form of rags, etc.

-- Marx, *Capital*

Strange, among mystics, poets, and diviners, to invoke Karl Marx. And yet he also read the invisible. With this difference: the visible, material operations of industry were bluntly apparent, but the underlying logic of value and of capital itself

² Throughout, Bonney's words appear either in quotation marks or in block quotation. See the Acknowledgments page for more info.

were effectively invisible to all. Marx's materialism, then, sought to bring an invisible order that had emerged from the visible, material relations of capitalist society back into plainly material terms. And forever, this ghostly dialectic of the visible and invisible exert pressures which, in one way or another, we are here to read.

A hundred million people use electricity and still
believe in the magic power of signs and exorcisms,
in the nightmare of their lives as slaves to the rich.
...

It is impossible to fully grasp Rimbaud's work, and
especially *Une Saison en Enfer*, if you have not
studied through and understood the whole of
Marx's *Capital*.

To read the forces of the invisible is to divine. And Sean Bonney's poetry is rife with divinatory language. Scrying, augury, numerology, astrology. Psychogeography. Communion with the dead. All these figure into his work. And this is not idiosyncrasy or affectation. It's not his private interest, a perverse challenge to Marxist materialism and atheism. It is essential to what he is doing. The poet takes up divinatory logic precisely when the psychic violence of class consciousness forces the subject out of itself, into and against matter, such that the material world becomes interfused with psyche, and psyche with matter.

Wall. Barricade. Law. Names for things that would keep one from exploding. To keep one proper, properly a person, an Eye, within a world legible as property, as commodity. "Say they have enclosed us in blank stone . . . the enemy is non-material, we are not." The enemy exploits the logic of the invisible, the presence that goes unnoticed, and reduces us to matter and nothing more. Solitary confinement. An eye foreclosed in signs-

as-walls. Along with this is the magic trick by which the activity of the enemy, as well as our resistance to it, is presumed to be unreal. “Ask who are these custodians of yesterday’s rebellions—insist that it really happened, we are not at all imaginary.” Just as the enemy escapes into the invisible and unreal, so too do those moments in which people identify it and revolt. The logic of the invisible elides these revolts into just some glitch, some immaterial, abstract nothing. Not even invisible anymore. Just null.

there is a law it
patrols the invisible
is dark outside
...

Take some sulphate, some hydrogen, whatever,
elements, elementals, mash it all up
and boil the invisible
...

make visible whatever is forced into invisibility by
police realism

Police realism wants precisely to keep ones psyche in ones head. “The sound of the collective I being pushed back into its individuality.” Up against the wall. An I is to be an I, not another. Not a thing, an exploding thing. Not a star. Not a language of stars whose intelligence of distance, infinity, and futurity can awaken “the inheritors of the law” from the headlong stumble into the psychic abyss of mere personhood, mere property. Named and filed, expendable, already dead.

And since I can’t even leave the flat anymore, the ceiling might as well be the whole of the sky, and they’re tapping out new and brutal constellations. Here’s the sign of the surveillance camera. Here’s the medusa. Here’s the spear of Hades.

Hades, master of invisibility, was the god of both wealth and of death. (Plutocracy. The Invisible Hand.) Likewise, Medusa refused the eye, turned the looker to stone. She is not invisible, but one whose image was both death and a reduction to pure material. To become a trophy of Medusa's, a piece of property. (Statue, monument. Subject eclipsed by object.) One sees what can't be seen: death—its sterile word.

Here's the austerity mark. Here's the budget. A
whole new set of stars.
Astrology completely rewritten.

Astrology knows planets and stars cause precisely nothing. They are a lexicon of acausal connectors between psyche and matter. Matter exploded out into a self-organizing cosmos. "An organizing vortex." Astrology makes legible a vast psycho-material dialectic. It is an index of the present instant and that same instant's explosion, removing all possibility of remaining merely itself. "I" am not a Sun sign. "I" am not a Pisces. "I" am an aperture. A keyhole. Something giving onto an impossibly complex, fugitive chord whose harmonies interweave planets, matter, images. Persons. Uranus in my ceiling. Pluto screaming the ink on the receipt. The discarded snack wrapper is a signature of Mercury. Of capital. Of the surveillance camera. The fugitive.

Mostly we cannot read this language. Schizophrenics flood with signals beyond any capacity to process them. Unable to forget or ignore. It all gets written down, and then we're using nerve-ends as ink and paper, as language itself. You dismember yourself to speak.

Or this: in the liberation struggles, these people who were once relegated to the realm of the imagination, victims of unspeakable terrors, but content to lose themselves in hallucinatory dreams,

are thrown into disarray, re-form, and amid blood
and tears give birth to very real and urgent issues.
It's simple, social being determines content,
content deranges form, etc.

The seer, the shaman, is one for whom we have no adequate
place under capital. One who is nothing except social content.
A content which they translate out to the stars and back. The
one who deranges and is deranged, and thereby cures. Who
poisons to cure. To learn sicknesses and name them: law,
barricade, alienation, exploitation, etc. Plus:

- (a) the fusion of transnational capital with
reactionary political power
- (b) arbitrary militarization
- (c) a racist mobilization against selected
scapegoats
- (d) public opinion's spectral ditch
- (e) a fanatical ideology based on hypocrisy and
sentiment

The (proto-) divinatory consciousness common to shaman,
schizophrenic, and psycho-materialist poet is precisely that
collision of the material and psychic that police realism exists to
destroy. It is a subject position that has no use for property
whatsoever, no use even for itself. And, what is most dangerous:
the police know exactly what this means. "A while ago I started
wondering about the possibility of a poetry that only the enemy
could understand." What they understand is that this writing
wants them dead.

Grammar and syntax can no longer be controlled.
Speech, which usually would be your means of
entry to actual lived time, is compressed and
stretched into a network of circles and coils, at its
perimeter a system of scraped, negative music, and
at its center a wall. And then you wake up after a
night of terrible dreams to find you are that wall.

The divining eye of the psycho-materialist becomes an environment, a field of language, a new zodiac, and within it the subject ceases to be a person unto themselves. “I is another.” And not just alterity embedded in identity, but that which is beyond the self as proper person and is made at once common and fugitive, free and stolen. In the most human iteration of this, we have a quasi-idealized vision of communication and knowledge transmission as a psychic commons: “a type of tapestry or collage in which the ‘lyric I’ loses its privatized being, and instead becomes a collective, an oppositional collective, spreading backwards and forward through known and unknown time.”

Often, tho, the vision is more violent, figuring that which explodes outward, galactically, drawing with it pieces of barricades, police helmets, fragments of the wall. Escape not to a communist future, a possible utopia, but to the event of divinatory revolt. Cracking open the psyche, revealing the future not as time-yet-to-pass made legible, visible, in the now, but as an orientation, an occupation of the material present infused with contradictory, explosive significance.

Tiresias the birds. Tiresias who sees what only a child could see, who blunders up from hell and hell is not underground. Says riots are a work of vast, incomprehensible mourning . . . this really happened we have no fucking demands and Tiresias summoned voices of the vast dead charts of incomprehensible bird flight, everywhere we are those birds and it don’t mean shit the cops don’t know this.

This is not mysticism. Not romanticism either. “I’m not talking about the poem as magical thinking, not at all, but as analysis and clarity.” A clear view of what had once been invisible. Analysis as a kind of psychic enactment, of engagement with

what is seen and of the distance crossed in order to make it visible. "But remember, most poetry is mimetic of what some square thinks is incomprehensible, rather than an engagement with it." Never to let go of the now, even as one destroys it. To take as ones content the very violence of what one most wants to be rid of: the fascist degradations of capital as endured in a policed present. To see we are in fact policed into the present, barricaded from the passage out which the poem enacts in an accelerated "dialectical continuity in discontinuity." The poet takes this barricaded and policed condition as both physical and psychic fact, and what future it divines is first and foremost marked by the interpenetration of shattered body and shattered barricade. A kind of cyborg, or a deranged and exploded centaur. A hybrid of nerve-ends, of garbage, weaponry, language. Of architecture, drugs, music, corrugated metal. Of birdsong, riot, bleach, pulsar, stained concrete, Saturn, donated clothes. Of shredded receipts, washed-up plastic, mercury, exposed bone. Charms for annihilation, charms against. Letters. Songs.

Everything forced to the surface. I don't feel I'm myself anymore. I've fallen to pieces, I can hardly breathe. My body has become something else, has fled into its smallest dimensions, has scattered into zero. And yet, as soon as it got to it, it took a deep breath, it could suddenly do it, it had passed across, it could see its indeterminable function within the whole. Yeh?

THE GHOST MINE EXPLODES: TOWARD A PSYCHO-MATERIALIST POETICS

Psycho-materialism is a poetics attentive to the interpenetration of psyche and matter. As a theory, it grounds itself in a Marxist approach to history and materialism, and then works to take seriously Carl Jung's statement that it is probable that "psyche and matter are two different aspects of one and the same thing."¹ Similarly, it resonates with what poet Lisa Robertson has called "the imagination of matter." And it finds precedent in André Breton, who sought a "modern materialism" which would "reconcile Engels and Freud"—that is, a materialism that accounts for psyche.

Psycho-materialism is not Surrealism, per se, but neither is it "against" Surrealism. It orients itself by seeing that the momentary, theoretical conjunction of Surrealism and Marxism—of the psycho-poetic and the historical-material—remains an open question. In this, it takes a cue from Sean Bonney's "Notes on Militant Poetics," where he writes, "André Breton's insistence on the need to work out a combination of the insights of Rimbaud and Marx continues to be one of the most important ideas in the history of modernist poetics. It has yet to be satisfactorily achieved." Psycho-materialism stands in the light of Bonney's fundamental disappointment here while also (quixotically) working toward that elusive combination.

In what follows, I approach the subject from two angles: first, by examining what precisely is meant by "psyche," showing its connection to matter, and positioning it a 21st century context; and secondly, by describing psycho-materialism as a poetics, or

at least *an orientation toward the production of poetry*—specifically leftist, anti-capitalist poetry. Ultimately, my position is that psyche is an urgent concern within 21st century leftist art. This is an age defined not only by what Bernard Stiegler and Byung-Chul Han have called, respectively, psycho-power and psychopolitics, but also this is the age of the so-called Fourth Industrial Revolution, when psyche itself becomes open to extraction by capitalists through technological interface. However, to create an art adequate to the assault of 21st century psycho-politics, the psycho-materialist poem turns not toward spiritualism, symbols, and archetypes—nor toward a reductively anti-subjective materialism—but toward *a field in which psyche and materiality interpenetrate*. It brings the deforming and transforming powers of imagination into contact with historical conditions while seeking to explode the restricted, commodified forms of expression that continually reduce poetry and enable its assimilation by institutions bound to capital.²

Defining Psyche

The concept of psyche needs to be explained at some length. In part, this is due to its elusive nature; however, it is also due to the tendency for psyche to be 1) limited to a focus on the interior of the individual mind and 2) conflated with vaguely metaphysical or spiritual concerns. And because I am arguing for the importance of psyche to an anti-capitalist orientation and poetics, I need to spend some time correcting the misconception that a focus on psyche inevitably leads one into the suspect politics of mere individualism and/or ahistorical philosophizing. Against this, I want to show that the psychic perspective alters our sense of the individual and their relationship to the other, and that it has a close connection to materiality that reorients the very use of the word “psyche” itself.

Of course, when seeking a definition of “psyche,” one typically comes across some version of the following: that psyche is the totality of the human mind, both conscious and unconscious; that it exists as a complex of forces whose effects are seen in particularities of personality, emotion, behavior, thought, and perception; and that it is susceptible to pathological aberration. And all that is true, so far as it goes. However, I want to seriously complicate and enrich this rote definition, first by drawing on the work of post-Jungian psychologist James Hillman. For Hillman, psyche is, above all, an autonomous process of image formation and fantasy. As such, psyche is not an *object* so much as a *highly reflexive process* affecting every aspect of reality. For Hillman—as for Blake and Sufism, among other sources—an individual is as though inserted *within* psyche just as much as psyche is said to be within the person: thus, psyche both includes and exceeds the “I.” And as such, it alters the experience of the “I,” revealing one to oneself as—in addition to an embodied mind and a political subject—a *process and product of image making*. It touches the deepest, most intimate aspects of one’s life, and yet it is also a kind of portal out of oneself and into a fundamental strangeness—or recognition-in-strangeness—a space of metamorphosis and otherness.

Perhaps the clearest way of approaching psyche is to understand it as an expansive redefinition of what we mean by *imagination*. In fact, for Jung, “Image *is* psyche.” Following Jung, Hillman elaborates by writing that our world is mediated continually by images, and that nothing comes into consciousness that is not impacted by the shaping of imagination: “Every reality of whatever sort is first of all a fantasy image of the psyche”; “At the same time these images are in us we live in the midst of them.” This is not philosophical idealism, however; it is the recognition that imagination (i.e. “fantasy”) constitutes human

experience in a fundamental way. Granted, we cannot simply replace reality with fantasy; rather, what facts are given to us by the real become the material of our fantasy: the two interweave continually such that everything is at least partly dream. Thus, when we talk about psyche, we are inevitably talking about things named in the rote definition above, but we are also talking about *a reflexive, protean field of image formation that intersects with and shapes our experience of the material world.*

For poets, though, this does not mean a reversion to Imagism, the Deep Image, or any other focus on image as mere physical description. Similarly, it is not meant to turn us back to the unconscious and hallucinated images of Surrealism. Rather, psycho-materialism seeks to reorient our awareness of imagination itself as fundamental to reality formation and thereby to explode the poet's consciousness of their task as imaginative worker. Accordingly, a poet's work is not to render space of beauty and aesthetic activity above or separate from the ravages of historical, material conditions, but to recognize that these conditions are themselves a process and product of imaginative activity (just as imagination is a product and process of materiality—the two intertwining endlessly). As such, we are walking through the fruits and ruins of a trans-personal, social, and material activity of poesis at all times. Once this is recognized, it is hard to content oneself with a poem that does not allow in as much as possible of the noise and activity of this inexhaustibly dreaming and destroying world. A psycho-material poem, then, is often a document of how it has been exceeded by its own awareness of this endless flux.

As indicated above, an important clarification is needed here to distinguish between the psychic and the spiritual. And while I may risk dwelling too long on the point, I do so because it has political implications. Again, I follow Hillman in much of this,

who himself follows a variety of classical sources.³ He asserts that psyche has a much stronger affinity to matter than to spirit. In fact, he opposes spirit and psyche in a spatial metaphor wherein spirit belongs to the transcendent heights of the mountaintop, of the one who leaves earthly affairs behind (e.g. Nietzsche's Zarathustra). By contrast, psyche stays closer to matter, to the valleys and lower places, where weather, familiarity, and use weave dream and imagination into all things. Whereas psyche's closeness to matter results in its loving the unassimilable differences—allowing the particularities, deformities, and the colorations of material things to exist in imaginal constellations of meaning and feeling—spirit's ultimate drive is transparency, presence, Oneness: the transcendence of the material world in a consummation of pure being. And as one might anticipate, given the right material conditions and ideology, the politics of this spiritual drive can become lethal.⁴

And here, on the question of death, is where I leave Hillman behind. Whereas he writes in purely psychological terms, my aim is to bring psyche into dialogue with historical and material conditions. It is one thing to recognize that psyche and spirit maintain an essential relationship to death, but quite another to note that death and violence are used every day to enforce the rule of capital. Whereas psyche maintains dialogue with death, and the dead themselves, *as a power of imagination* that deepens experience and brings dream and meaning⁵, the death wielded by capital—esp. by police, military, and fascists—acts as a kind of *anti-psyche power*. It reduces and controls the boundaries of the real, of the permissible and possible, and forecloses meaning and the autonomy of psyche by routing it into dead monuments, false spectacles, and a torrent of endless misinformation that degrades experience (while rendering it profitable). When capital polices the real, it polices interwoven powers of fantasy as well, and thus *it enforces the reality of its own fantasy*. And

by abusing this intersection of the material world with the psychic—massaging and annihilating our perception in increasingly insidious ways—capitalism’s enforcement of the absolute substantiality of these fantasies has a power that far exceeds that of art. As such, imagination is continually weaponized against itself. And in the 21st century, this weaponization is on its way to being perfected.

The Psycho-political Moment

In 2016, the leader of the World Economic Forum, Klaus Schwab, asserted that we are living through the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Some have even deemed this “The Age of Imagination,” continuing a chronology running from the Agricultural to the Industrial and, later, Information ages. What this suggests, then, is that “imagination”—what we have called psyche—is a new source of productivity in an economy sensitized as never before to the minute fluctuations of individual psychology and physiology of users/consumers in the form of Data. As such, psyche has been directly drawn into history and being exploited for material ends in a uniquely targeted way.

Addressing this situation in his book *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*, Byung-Chul Han has described this as a “psychic turn” in 21st century capitalism, wherein it “discovers the psyche as a productive force.” Following Bernard Stiegler, he even suggests a shift from Foucauldian biopower to what he calls “psychopower.” However, Han goes further than Stiegler in updating this process, recognizing that the primary material/economic engine of this shift is “Big Data,” with its appetite for complete knowledge of our desires, habits of communication, our range of affects, and how to manipulate each of these into profit. And

this data is in fact a commodity we produce, for free, in an interface between technological powers of extraction and the most intimate aspects of our lives. As subjects in a technocratic data regime, we are compelled to discipline our synapses with various degrees of addiction, externalizing its labor as content and intel, rendering our subjectivity transparent to those who would control it. As Han writes, “This knowledge is knowledge for the sake of domination and control: it facilitates intervention in the psyche and allows influence to take place on a pre-reflexive level.” That is, under this influence, one does not have a position from which to critically reflect: it becomes the very conditions of reflection itself. The social, material poesis that is reality has always been controlled; however, it has not always been able to adapt in real time to whatever will be most profitable to the person staring at the screen—all while recording and documenting each moment.

Ultimately, such total mediatization under a psycho-political order seeks the total infiltration of imagination and dream. However, as threatening and outlandish as this may seem, it is not entirely new. After all, capitalism has inscribed itself in desire and dream life across multiple centuries, as Marx himself observed early on when describing commodity fetishism. More recently, Mark Fisher stated in *Capitalist Realism*, “[The] fact that capitalism has colonized the dreaming life of the population is so taken for granted that it is no longer worthy of comment.” Like Han, Fisher saw that, under capital, “Work and life become inseparable. Capital follows you when you dream. Time ceases to be linear, becomes chaotic . . . As production and distribution are restructured, so are nervous systems.” And at its most extreme, when imagination is literalized and framed technologically, and when our insertion into its media become the conditions of our participation in society—both at work and at home, in labor and recreation—we experience the

destruction-via-commodification of the psychic perspective, turning it against itself as a form of control and extraction. Against this, psycho-materialism—as a recognition that psyche exists historically and materially, and as a drive to maintain psyche’s political and imaginative power in service of anti-capitalist liberation—is tasked with confronting our age’s attempted foreclosure of psyche in the ongoing domination of capitalism.

However, in this confrontation, we experience what Franco “Bifo” Berardi calls the “spasm.” In *Heroes: Mass Murder and Suicide*—his analysis of violence as a reaction to the atomizing and desensitizing effects of neoliberalism—he writes that this spasm is “a double process of acceleration and exhaustion.” Like Han and Fisher, Berardi traces this in part to “the effect of a violent penetration of the capitalist exploitation into the field of info-technologies, involving the sphere of cognition, of sensibility, and the unconscious.” Berardi goes further:

The brain mutation that is underway can be described as a spasmodic attempt to cope with the surrounding chaotic infosphere and to reframe the relation between infosphere and brain. . . . Not only the psychic dimension of the unconscious is disturbed, but the fabric of the neural system itself is subjected to trauma, overload, disconnection.

It is as though we are experiencing collective psychic trauma under conditions of 21st century capitalism. And to be clear, this is not just about “Big Data.” Everything I have described above is conditioned profoundly by the reality of global pandemic, intensifying ecological catastrophe, the renewed prospect of nuclear war, unceasing carceral predation, resurgent fascism and white supremacy, the collapse of a coherent infosphere, the

strengthening of borders against swelling populations of refugees, rising sea levels, and the steady drone of the sixth extinction. As such—under the power of psychopolitics, of capitalist realism, of the accelerated/exhausted age of spasm—we live in a fundamentally dangerous and destabilizing psychic situation. For anyone who wants to be awake to their historical moment, it is necessary to confront the violence of psychopower and the nightmarish reality it mediates, and yet total receptivity to this power is morally and emotionally unendurable. And so one modulates consciousness, thus running the risk of escapism, of defeat and capitulation. In this situation, when the psychomaterial nexus of capitalism totally enfolds us, the distinction between poison and medicine, between health and illness, begin to blur. And it is here, in this poison space, that poetry has to work.

Sketching a Poetics

Fuck poems / and they are useful
—Amiri Baraka

Given the urgency of conditions, it might seem quaint—especially for an anti-capitalist—to limit oneself to a question of poetry. However, cultural production does have a place in struggle as well, and when trying to offer historical context for such production, it does no good to deny the extent of the emergency. Ultimately, in the global situation given to us in 2022, we are burdened with the very real prospect of a world without a future—or what amounts to the same thing: *nightmare*. And the nightmare state is, quite simply, a condition of psychic domination: the foreclosure of any participation in reflexive shaping of reality; everything reduced to a literal, closed narrative of destruction. Present already wherever there is war, devastation, and reduction of life to mere survival, this

nightmare now flickers continually as the common horizon of twenty-first century psychic life.

Naturally, as stated, there is a powerful desire to escape and deny these conditions. And for poets of any political commitment, it becomes all too easy to content oneself with a poetics that has been divorced from our nightmarish conditions, to seek a space “above the fray,” a space of peace. And of course one needs peace too. Poetry as a practice of care, of quiet renewal and reflection—these too are necessary in their way. And I don’t want to prescribe one mode of writing as superior. However, I *do* want to assert that no poetics can sustain its vitality for long under 21st century conditions without at some point confronting the nightmare spasms of a threatened imagination—and I believe this is all the more crucial for leftist, anti-capitalist poets. Because only by confronting these very real conditions can imagination have any chance of resisting capital’s drive toward further psychic enclosure. One has to be honest about what is at stake, and in part this means admitting that poems are frequently irrelevant in the extreme. For what we are up against is reshaping the conditions of life on this planet. It is burrowing into psychic territory we have no adequate language for, and falling back into conventional modes of poetic articulation—and congratulating ourselves for poetry’s preservation of “empathy, compassion, humanity”—simply dodges the issue. Ultimately, one has to ask: What is your poem saying in response to capitalist psychopower’s effort to rewrite your imagination under conditions of planetary destruction? And can you take it seriously in this light of this?

As an act of writing back against this capitalist force of control and inscription—as a kind of counter-writing—psycho-materialism seeks to place imagination in a radical relation to the material world we inhabit, in all its damage, and to explore this dialectic. And I stress this dialectical quality here because a *non-*

materialist, ahistorical poetics of psyche is nothing new. We have long seen how poets become trapped in a de-historicized realm of archetypes, of pastoral longings and nostalgic denials, and an aestheticism that is ultimately conservative if not reactionary. And the same is true for the inverse: a reductively realist, materialist poetics divorced from psyche inevitably becomes conservative and dogmatic (as do various forms of stridently anti-subjectivist poetics)⁶. Against all of these tendencies, psycho-materialism seeks to keep psyche and materiality in dialectical tension by 1) maintaining a consciousness of the world as given historically and materially, even when this involves damage; 2) experiencing and recording this engagement as a potent psychic event for the reader; and 3) exceeding and disrupting the closed reading experience that privileges (aesthetic, rhetorical, moral) resolution and unity in favor of continued tension and continued redirection to the world off the page. At the risk of being too prescriptive, I'll say that this often involves disrupting unified voices and discourses by adding more layers and registers, more material in dialectical tension and collision. The language of astronomy and myth might sit right next to that of finance. Personal confession runs up against citation from unrelated news reports. And all of this disparate material is recorded as a process of psychic becoming—as language inhabiting the emergency.

Ultimately, the psycho-materialist wants the poem to keep exploding into the world, even as it collides with the nightmare. And in this process of psychic confrontation and transformation, this poetics could be described as a Guattarian *chaosmosis*⁷: it absorbs the spasmodic, lethal psycho-material operations of capital in an age of technological enframement of life and deploys them in new imaginative forms that expose, resist, and re-organize the psychic valence of these operations. According to Felix Guattari, the individual elements effecting this process of chaosmosis are called *chaoïdes*: “The *chaoïde* is full of chaos,

receives and decodes the bad vibrations of the planetary spasm, but does not absorb the negative psychological effects of chaos, of surrounding aggressiveness, of fear” (Berardi). I think it is fair to say that psycho-material poetics is, in part, the production of such *chaoides*. It may seek to neutralize psychic apocalypse in a context of historical disruption, but in doing so it must behave apocalyptically. It is waking up into the nightmare.

Of course, in an essay of this kind, a reader likely will expect textual examples. They will want names for marking out a new school or style of poetry. Put bluntly, I abhor this tendency in critical writing. I hate the limits of inclusion/exclusion around “schools” and generations, of the arbitrary demarcations of a “new thing,” and of the inevitable embarrassment it brings to all involved. All that is just publicity. If you want to know what this poetry looks like, *write it*. Psycho-materialism is not a model or a school *but a vantage to be used*. You don’t have to be your poem, you aren’t its brand name. *There are things the poem knows as process, and communicates as product*, that a your need to identify yourself with your poem’s voice may only distort. // Chemical productions in the synapse decay: your head is an exploded loop. (Taste of sulphur, of lead.) // “I” is just one available frequency. Sometimes a kaleidoscopic, delirious rant; sometimes a voice as lucid as a textbook. (Enclosures coaxed toward breakage, glitches nursed and weathered into music.) Material and historical signifiers bleed into imaginal or abstract ones. Juxtaposed citations, fictions, jokes. Polyvocality. “Here are the dead communes, here the retired black sites.” A pattern of accidents, an accidental pattern. “We lived through it over and over.” Montage, collage. Syntax as surgery. Language as mercury, // a poisonous material. And latent in each syllable are the tongues of the dead, their // teeth and nervous systems. Whose affects are fueled in mine, stopped in wonder, lighting up fugitive images, dissolving in faint spirals?

An archive of spirals, a lineage of dreams, disguises, contradictions. “Here is SpaceX, Bolivia, apartheid, Mars.” *Seven billion souls. Twenty billion times the sun.* Permanent synchronicity. Cut-ups, collisions, blurs. Heteroglossia, layers that cannot be assimilated. *There is no inside to pull from that isn’t already all around us.* (A fly on a rifle in Yemen. Collider and array. Trained and funded by.) A soul of tantalum, of heartwood. Of bosons, workers, spectral factories. Dialectical images explode. Imagistic explosions cutting through a dialectic of psyche and material, of dream and economic production, of historical rupture, recovery, awakening, a zodiac of speeding scraps.

Endnotes to “The Ghost Mine Explodes”

1. For Jung, this bond between matter/psyche is illustrated in part by the phenomenon of *synchronicity*. This concept is important to the psycho-material perspective, but my attempts to discuss it within the essay proper only overwhelmed an already complicated text. For Jung, as discussed in *On Synchronicity; Memories, Dreams, Reflections*; and elsewhere, synchronicity is an “acausal connecting principle” that is witnessed in momentary convergences of interior psychic experience with events in the external world that seem to rhyme with uncanny precision, even dissolving the boundary between inner and outer. This is distinct from the mind *causing* the external event to converge, or vice versa, which would be more properly telekinetic and paranormal—or, alternatively, mere coincidence. For Jung, synchronicity was a cosmic fact, corroborating alchemical teachings of correspondence between the micro and macrocosm, the above and the below; it was a revelation of the simultaneous or inextricable natures of psyche and matter, showing that they somehow belonged the same intelligent medium. Ultimately, this suggests that matter is in some way *psyche-delic*: it bears or manifests psyche. Again, while it is only implied in the essay itself, synchronicity and its implications are foundational for a psycho-materialist view (even as it breaks from a Jungian paradigm).

Further, it is worth noting here that most Marxists who theorize psyche turn toward a Freudian lineage running through Lacan. My attention to Jung deviates considerably from this, though there is precedent, esp. in the work of Deleuze & Guattari. But again, I am not a Jungian and have no use for his personality theory, his gender binary, or his followers’ systematization of his thought.

2. This essay limits its focus to theoretical and aesthetic considerations. However, I take it as given that any aesthetic gesture can be appropriated and neutralized by capital. Thus, as I have addressed in other essays (e.g. “Poets Should Be Socialists” & “The Poet as Producer”; see also Poets Union website), theoretical and aesthetic innovations are not sufficient for grounding an anti-capitalist poetic practice. Equal attention needs to be given to the economic aspects of literary production.

3. Hillman himself follows the Neoplatonist Marsilio Ficino in much of this, who drew upon the classical triad of psyche (or soul), spirit, and body (or living matter). In this triad, each had its virtues and its distinct nature, but psyche stood in between the other two as a kind of phase space through which spiritual and material fluctuations manifested in image formation and pathology.

4. An important qualification is necessary here regarding psyche’s relationship 1) to spirit and 2) to the reactionary force of fascism—two concepts which frequently run together, albeit along mistaken routes. Regarding spirit, I tend to neglect its importance in this essay by focusing instead on the two other parts of the spirit-psyche-matter triad. However, this is not to deny spirit or be against all that is “spiritual,” and it is not to assert atheism. Spirit is simply a necessary aspect of human existence. The vitalizing power of spirit is noticeable in enthusiasm, inspiration, belief, etc. One can literally become dispirited, and capital often compels this state of deflation. So the need for spirit is not to be discounted.

Further, against all I am saying, one could argue that psyche—in its intimate connection with myth, pathology, and the unconscious—is more likely to function as a channel for reactionary than liberatory politics. And yes, fascist forces plug themselves into psyche’s channel with ease when material

conditions are right. However, *psyche itself is not reactionary*. What is reactionary in this equation is the fascist's *reification* of psyche's productions: it locks imagination into icons, monuments, monolithic platitudes, sentimental myths, etc. And much of this depends on their fundamental drive away from matter and psyche *toward spirit*: toward a (mistaken, infantile) doctrine of purity, of the heights and of "greatness," the fantasy of an idealized past. As such, fascists have only dead husks. And this is why they need violence: only blood can impart some semblance of vitality and life in their dead imaginary.

5. Regarding this connection between death and psyche, recall that the specters populating Hades were in fact called "psyches." Further, Hillman writes, "The House of Hades is a psychological realm now, not an eschatological realm later . . . Hades' realm is contiguous with life, touching it at all points, just below it, its shadow brother (*Doppelgänger*) giving to life its depth and psyche" (from *The Dream and the Underworld*).

6. I am thinking here not only of older theories of "socialist realism" but also 1) any poetics that would dismiss psyche as the concern of individualists and metaphysicians, and 2) the anti-subjectivism seen in various forms of "avant-garde" writing (e.g. Language and Conceptual writing). On the theoretical failures of anti-subjectivism, see Keston Sutherland's "Theses on Anti-Subjectivist Dogma" in *A Fiery Flying Roule* (May 1st 2013).

7. I am indebted to Berardi for Felix Guattari's idea of *chaosmosis*. He discusses the concept at some length in *Heroes: Mass Murder and Suicide* (Verso 2015).

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In “Identity and Its Discontents,” all quotations come from the Fowlie/Whidden translations in *Rimbaud: Complete Works, Selected Letters* (Univ. Chicago Press, 2005). Specific quotes come from “War,” “Childhood,” and “To Reason” in *Illuminations*; “Night in Hell” from *A Season in Hell*; and from selected letters.

In “Revolt and Divination,” all quotes (unless indicated) are from Sean Bonney's *Letters Against the Firmament* (Enitharmon Press, 2015).

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